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Sermons of James Freeman Clarke

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CHRIST AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE  
LIGHT OF MODERN THOUGHT

VI.

JESUS AS AUTHOR AND FIN-  
ISHER OF FAITH

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## JESUS AS AUTHOR AND FINISHER OF FAITH.

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“Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith.” **HEB.** xii. 2.

In our common translation this verse reads, “Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith.” But the pronoun “our” is put in *Italics*, showing that it is a word not in the original, but one added by the translators. It may therefore be omitted. We get a much better meaning when we do omit it. Then, instead of the commonplace statement that our Christian faith comes from Jesus, which is a mere truism, we have the higher and more important doctrine that faith was completed and made perfect in Jesus. The long series of witnesses to the faith, before adduced, beginning with Abel, and passing on through Noah, Abraham, Moses, the prophets and martyrs, culminates at last in Jesus, in whom faith reaches its perfect development.

Let us this morning consider this quality of faith in the character of Jesus, and see in what respect he is the best manifestation of this great power, and how in Jesus it was in harmony with reason and founded on reality. Let us also consider the effect which his faith has had on the world, to create faith in others, and what a beneficent power it is in promoting human progress.

Many definitions of faith have been given, but never a better than that of this writer to the Hebrews, “The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” The objects of faith are things invisible, and things hoped for. We do not have faith in evil, but in good; not in death, but

in life; not in hell, but in heaven. I may say, "I have faith in the goodness of human nature," but I cannot say, "I have faith in human depravity or faith in human wickedness." Until we see goodness in God, we cannot have faith in him. Nor can I properly say, "I have faith that this country is going to destruction," but I can say, "I have faith in the great future and coming prosperity of the country." By faith we connect ourselves with future good, and hold ourselves to it. Thus faith is the substance of things hoped for, not of things feared and dreaded. These things are also unseen things, belonging not to the material, but the spiritual world. It is a future unseen good, which manifests itself to the soul. Therefore faith is itself an evidence of the reality of its object. Faith gives substance to things hoped for, and shows that they are not fancies. Trust in divine goodness, confidence in God's love, reliance on good to come out of present trial, the assurance that all things dark are to work out a brighter day, the confidence which enables heroes to struggle for a great cause and martyrs to suffer for it; to hope against hope; to triumph against outward obstacles, opposition, persecution, hatred,—this power in the soul is a proof of some great reality which produces it. It is not produced by human wilfulness. Men do not die for the truth from mere caprice. There is a divine light which shines from above into the souls of saints and martyrs, which lifts them above themselves, and enables them to do and to bear in a wonderful way. This is evidence of the reality of that for which they thus labor and die. Thus "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church;" for the world argues that there must be something great and important in a cause for which men are willing thus to labor and die. The faith of the martyr is itself evidence of the reality of the things unseen and hoped for.

But, you may say, "Is this evidence always sound?"

Does not hope often deceive us? How can we say that a man's faith in some future good is evidence of the reality of that good when very frequently the good is not there and never comes?"

The fact is certainly so, and it shows that there is an unreasonable and unsound faith as well as a reasonable and sound one. How, then, are they to be distinguished?

True faith is the inward sight of eternal realities: the false and deceitful imitation of it is believing what we wish to believe. The one is sight, the other is will. In the one case we open our eyes and look: in the other case we shut our eyes, and are blind. The man of faith is one who wishes to obey the truth, to do what is right, who is pure in heart, guided by conscience. The man who is deceived is self-deceived. He obeys his wishes, his prejudices. He is blinded by custom, whim, routine, the opinions which are profitable and fashionable. To distinguish between faith in realities and the belief of phantasms one must therefore be truthful, honest, and sincere. In proportion as we are truthful we can distinguish between reality and appearance in the spiritual and moral world.

This is the proof for ourselves. The proof for others is mostly to be found in the sacrifices that we are willing to make for what we believe. No doubt men will make sacrifices for delusions; but in the history of the world we find that what people are ready to work for, suffer for, die for, turns out to be true and important.

The martyrs for truth in all times have been first ridiculed, then opposed, and at last accepted and followed. Unless there is a reality behind our faith we are discouraged and cease our efforts. But truth, though crushed to earth, rises again.

The translators of the New Testament took the liberty of inserting the word "our" because they could understand

how Jesus came to give us faith, but did not see how he could need faith himself. He was, in their opinion, God, not subject to human needs. How, then, could he want the support and help which comes from faith? We are justified by faith and saved by faith; but Jesus did not need to be justified or saved, therefore he did not live by faith, but by a divine knowledge and a divine power. And that, I suppose, is the opinion of many even now, and they would hardly think of calling Jesus a man of faith.

But, if we consider it, we shall find, I think, that Jesus was a man of faith in the highest degree,—an example of faith for all time,—and that he is able to give us faith because he had it himself in such perfection. He was the author and finisher of faith, the highest example of spiritual insight the world has known.

One proof of insight is clearness of statement. What men see clearly they state plainly. Wherever there is vagueness, hesitation, or inconsistency in expression it suggests obscurity of vision. The great masters of thought have a very luminous utterance.

There was an English statesman who possessed this power in a high degree. Although entirely blind, yet as a member of the English government and of the House of Commons he exercised the greatest influence. Whenever he spoke, he was listened to with deep interest, for his speech was luminous with sound argument, a thorough knowledge of facts, his face radiant with intelligence, the tones of his voice full of cheer and confidence. He could answer instantly any question put to him concerning the subject of which he spoke. He knew each speaker by the sound of his voice, and remembered what each had said, so that men with eyesight sitting by his side referred to him to know who had spoken and what had been the argument of each previous speaker. What gave Mr.

Fawcett the courage, being blind, to achieve such success and exercise such influence? It was confidence in truth, faith in the power belonging to reason, to knowledge, to just and right aims. It was confidence that, blind as he was, if he knew more of important truth than other men, and could make that truth clear, he would do a work which might benefit his fellow-men. This was faith in things unseen. The evidence of what he hoped for was already in his mind, or he would not have dared, as a blind man, to attempt that great work which he did so well that England to-day mourns his death as a national disaster.

I have been reading the life of Emerson, by Dr. Holmes. What gave Emerson his power over so many minds in England and America, men of thought and learning, and also over plain, practical people? He influenced thousands, led them to see great truths, to recognize the nobleness of justice, to honor what is grand in conduct and character. He taught us to respect our own convictions as the light of God within. He gave a spiritual tone to literature: he showed that there is something divinely beautiful in nature and a heavenly presence working in us to will and to do. This was another example of the power of faith. It was like Abel offering to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain. Emerson also had within himself the evidence of things not seen. Unseen truths were more real and certain to his soul than the visible phenomena of valley and wood, river, sunshine, and storm. And, because he saw them so clearly, he said them so that thousands of men and women were also able to see them.

In this sense faith is spiritual insight: it is the perception of infinite realities. It is a heavenly vision. It is finding what Archimedes sought, a place outside the world from which to move the world. It is a power, latent in us all, ready to be developed as we cherish and cultivate it.

It is the only door to religion, the only avenue by which we reach God. It is the pure heart which sees God: it is the simplicity of soul which enables babies in knowledge to see things hidden from the wise and prudent. This is the religious faculty in man by which all men may come into communion with God. It is the faculty of which Jesus said, "If the light within you be darkness, how great is that darkness!" And also, "If your eye be single, your whole body shall be full of light."

This power of spiritual insight reached its perfection in Jesus. In other souls, even the greatest, it is often obscured and darkened. It is an occasional, not a permanent, vision. But of Jesus it was truly said, "The spirit was not given by measure." His vast power over the human soul comes from the fact that he saw spiritual facts and laws so plainly that they stand before us as solid substances. He is prophet, priest, king, saint, martyr, mediator, Saviour, because in him faith and knowledge were identical.

Man belongs to two worlds,—the world of time and sense, the world of thought, love, and spirit. We are drawn down to earth by daily duties and outward cares. But from time to time God sends a prophet, a man of faith, who opens to us the gates of the spiritual world, and shows us things hoped for and unseen as divine realities. All who have uplifted the race have done so by means of this vision and faculty divine. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, the power which rose to its loftiest elevation in Jesus was seen, in a less degree, in Abraham and David, even in Samson and Noah, Gideon and the superstitious Jephthah. They had in the germ what Jesus had in the ripe, consummate flower. And, if we can say this of Samson and Jephthah, much more may we say it of Socrates and others who have inspired mankind with the sight of laws which rule the phenomena of earth.

We do not undervalue Jesus when we place him at the apex of this pyramid of human aspiration. The faith of all races centres in him. Jew and Gentile, Hindu seer and Greek Platonist, find their aspirations fulfilled in him. Of his fulness we all receive.

Jesus stands at the head of the prophets of mankind. He unites all prophecy and teaching in himself. His words are spirit and life. He is our leader and master, because he has in its fulness that which we have imperfectly. He lifts what is best in all of us to a higher power. He makes us share his own inspiration. He carries the world back to its infancy, makes of us little children, and says, "Suffer the little children to come to me, for of such is the kingdom of God."

This is the work which men of faith do for their race. When there is no open vision,—when we live by routine, when we are anchored to old creeds,—then are sent sages and seers who speak from insight and knowledge. They show that the moral law is higher than the heavens, deeper than the primitive granite, that the measure of it is broader than the sea, and that it is the thing to live for and to die for. Roused by such living words, men shake off their sloth, and are ready to battle for truth, justice, and humanity. This faith in things unseen creates heroes and martyrs in every age. It is curious to see how men like Tyndall and Huxley, drawn by the bias and habit of their nature toward materialism, nevertheless rejoice in the words of Emerson, and follow him like little children. When a new prophet comes, the heavens are once more opened. God ceases to be a name: he fills the universe with his presence. Once more the heavens declare his glory, and the firmament showeth his handiwork. A light which never shone on sea or land once more descends into the human soul. Once more we are children of God and immortal by our birth-

right. The soul is secure in its faith and freedom not by force of argument, but by a revival of spiritual instincts. Creeds fail, logic ceases to satisfy; but one word of insight from prophet or poet re-creates the world.

Jesus did not come to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfil them. Not a word of true prophecy in any land or religion shall ever fall to the ground. He makes these sayings more sure, confirms them, and fills them with his own fulness. Of that fulness they all receive, and grace added to grace.

Therefore we keep this Christmas season, and rejoice in all lands at the birth of a little child. Jesus came to make certain the supremacy and immortality of soul. What Socrates hoped, what Plato sought after, Jesus saw and knew. The proof that he saw it is that during these long centuries his words have continued to lead the race upward. As the planets replenish their golden urns with fire from the solar blaze, so faith in our hearts is renewed by the calm, sweet light which flows from the mind and heart of Jesus. He brings us near to God. The universal Father takes us again in his arms. We poor, lost, sinful children are again at home and at peace. We come to Jesus when we labor and are heavy laden, and find rest. We look to him, the author and finisher of faith, and are lightened, and our faces are not ashamed.

The truths which Jesus teaches are in harmony with all other knowledge. How rational is the Sermon on the Mount! How humane and practical the religion of the Good Samaritan! How simple the sweet aspirations of the Lord's Prayer! Jesus propounds no obscure creed: he demands no blind assent to unintelligible propositions. He lets his light shine that we may see it, if we will, and glorify our Father in heaven. He does not force his truth on unwilling minds, but says, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me."

The teaching of Jesus was the beginning of a new epoch of progress for mankind, because it gave this higher inspiration. Earthly improvement and discovery and human civilization are quickened by the sight of these laws, boundless as the universe. As the sun, ninety millions of miles away, must send its beams to earth before the smallest seed of fungus or lichen can begin to grow, so the infinite truths, above time and space, must come to quicken man's soul before he can make progress in art, science, or literature. In all races religion leads the way: the Muses and Graces follow after.

When God gives faith to prophets, he gives it not for them alone, but for others. This is food which all share with them. It is the Master's feast, open to all. The prophets modestly say: "We have five loaves and two small fishes. What are they among so many?" But the prophets' insights are multiplied by a wonderful power, so that all eat and are filled. We still assuage our intellectual hunger with the food which Plato offers us, our moral hunger with the words of Epictetus, and our spiritual life is fed by Jesus. Those who are fed thus can feed others. Every soul which sees a spiritual truth and utters it adds to the stock of faith belonging to mankind.









